Language in the news

In this issue we highlight another interpreter casualty in Afghanistan, insight into how language may affect thought, a radio program on language and culture, and a growing need for foreign language education.

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Another interpreter death in Afghanistan

Ataollah Taefik Khalili, an interpreter working for Spanish Civil Guard troops in Afghanistan, died along with two civil guards in a terrorist attack on 25 August 2010. A native Iranian and a practitioner of the Bahai faith, Ataollah Taefik Khalili had been living in Spain for more than 30 years and was a naturalized citizen of that country.

The events were widely covered in the Spanish media. You can read a summary with short biographies of the victims in this Mundo article. A period of mourning was announced in the Boletín Oficial del Estado, but no mention of the death of the interpreter was included. The Ministry of Defense and the Guardia Civil both awarded posthumous medals to Ataollah Taefik Khalili, as reported by Heraldo.es.

In a press release, AIIC expressed its condolences to the families and its concern “That many interpreters have died in war zones and that no national or international agreements exist to protect them and to ensure adequate treatment and compensation for them and their families in the event of death or injury.”

Translation, between cultures

“Transeuropéennes” project since the start of the 1990s, after the fall of the Berlin Wall, the siege of Sarajevo and the first Gulf War, has been informed by a critique of identity-based exclusions and the prospects opened up by the idea of ‘translating, between cultures’.” (Also in French)

One of their projects is “a vast mapping of translation in the Mediterranean Area.”

Language and thought

Guy Deutscher, a researcher at the University of Manchester, recently published Through the Language Glass: How Words Colour Your World. You can get a general idea of what you’ll find in the book by reading the author’s extensive article in the NY Times.

For other views on the book, much commented upon in the UK, check out Alex Bellos’ review on the Guardian website, or a more detailed one on The Lousy Linguist blog (where I also found this quote from an unknown source: "Asking a linguist how many languages they speak is like asking a doctor how many diseases they have.").
In the Wall Street Journal, Stanford University Professor of Psychology Lera Boroditsky approaches the same type of questions: “Do the languages we speak shape the way we think? Do they merely express thoughts, or do the structures in languages (without our knowledge or consent) shape the very thoughts we wish to express?” In other words, is it true that “Russian speakers, who have more words for light and dark blues, are better able to visually discriminate shades of blue”?

**Through the booth window**

More and more blogs by interpreters are appearing. With our own in the works, I’ve been checking them out. This one – written in Spanish – merits a mention. In the words of the author:

“**Bootheando** es un blog escrito por un intérprete de conferencias que pretende hablar del mundo de la interpretación y del de la agricultura y ciencias afines desde el punto de vista del que está al otro lado del cristal.”

Check out the [home page](#) for the latest posts; scroll down a bit to find a couple of interesting videos. If you prefer to start knowing more what this blog aims at, go directly to the first post: ¿por qué bootheando?

**El Trujamán**

“**El Trujamán** es una revista diaria del [Centro Virtual Cervantes](#) dedicada en exclusiva a la traducción en todos sus aspectos que intenta, de modo sistemático, exponer las reflexiones de los traductores vinculados con la cultura hispánica. Este espacio se abre a todas las especialidades de la traducción: literaria, científica, técnica, administrativa, sin olvidar dos importantes aspectos de la misma: la enseñanza y la historia; asimismo, encontrarán anécdotas y citas.”

**Foreign Accent Syndrome**

After a neurological condition such as a stroke or head injury, some people speak with a different accent that they identify as foreign – thus the name of Foreign Accent Syndrome. One of the first cases of this rare malady was recorded in 1941 when a young Norwegian woman began speaking with a German accent after being struck by bomb shrapnel during an air raid, and then was shunned by friends and neighbors who took her for a German spy. Get more details from the BBC: What is foreign accent syndrome? and Coping with FAS, a video conversation with Kay Russell who recently awoke from a serious migraine with what sounds like a French accent.

**Interpreters also judged for beauty?**

The interpreting profession can be high profile in China, but I was nonetheless surprised when a link to the “most beautiful interpreter in China” appeared in my inbox. The Global Times Forum reports that Zhang Lu has many fans for her ability and her looks, and provides a [photo book](#) to prove at least one of the points. You can also see photographs of the “Seven Beauty Interpreters in China.” There still are men practicing the profession, but I’ve yet to see any references to the most handsome interpreters; I’ll be on the lookout in the name of gender equality!

**Podcasts on Language**

Public Radio International hosts [The World – Global Perspectives for an American Audience](#) (it would seem that a few people still think that is needed). An offshoot is [The World in Words](#). The site is easy to use – just scroll down to see what is on offer and then click to listen. I’ll be going back to learn more about how to swear in Irish, why Thais win at Scrabble, and why we mortals shouldn’t feel threatened by [Google Translate](#).

**And while we’re on that subject…**
The NY Times has put together a table that compares translations of five short texts (one each in French, Spanish, Russian, German and Arabic) done by a human, Google Translate, Yahoo Babel Fish and Microsoft Bing. Read Putting Google to the Test in Translation.

Print may be out for the OED

The unabridged Oxford English Dictionary comprises 20 volumes, weighs 62 kilograms and sells for $1300 (that’s $20/kilo for a 20 year old dictionary). Those 20 tomes, however, would occupy only 540 megabytes of digital storage space. Considering these facts, it would seem that demand for a future third edition – for which no publication date has been set - may be low. In all likelihood it will be replaced by a much lighter, though still pricey, online version, as PC World reports in Next Oxford English Dictionary May Go All-Digital.

Languages open doors

European Education, Culture, Multilingualism and Youth Commissioner Androulla Vassiliou “is backing an international declaration calling for more awareness-raising in schools and universities about the importance of language learning and career opportunities for interpreters, translators and other skilled language professionals.” Find out more and view the declaration on the European Commission website.

The state of foreign language learning in the UK

A Korean friend recently asked me about the truth of something he had heard: that if an American and an Englishman follow the same foreign language course, the Englishman will invariably come out speaking more fluently. OK, we were bantering over a beer (Irish), but it would seem that he hasn’t been reading the UK press recently: the English don’t study languages anymore.

“The new GCSE results show foreign languages are in severe decline – with the number of children learning French and German falling most dramatically of all,” according to Aida Edemariam in Who Still Wants to Learn Languages? (Guardian). She adds that “Ultimately, it is striking, and perhaps says much about current attitudes to education, that no one seems to feel safe enough – in public at least – to make the argument that modern languages might be worth studying, and defending, for their own sake.”

In a Guardian editorial - GCSR Results: Tongues Tied – the trend is lamented: “Three in four of the world's people speak no English, which is a lot of people to give up hope of trading with. More profoundly, to forgo familiarity with foreign languages is to forgo the chance to see the world from a foreign point of view.”

Indeed! And we certainly agree that global English is not enough for global business!

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Recommended citation format: